

Recall This Book 37  
Books In Dark Times 11  
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Elizabeth Bradfield

John Plotz:

From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book where we assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. I'm John Plotz and our RTB virtual guest today is the poet and naturalist, Elizabeth Bradfield, who is the author of several amazing books, including *Toward Antarctica*, *Approaching Ice*, *Once Removed*, *Interpretive Work*, and a recent collaborative work called *Theorem*. She's my colleague, my amazing colleague, at Brandeis University in English and Creative Writing. And she's also founder and editor in chief of Broadsided Press. And for the past 20 some years, she has also worked as a naturalist and guide. So Liz, hello and hi, thank you so much for doing this from your cozy Cape Cod eyrie. I really appreciate it.

Elizabeth Bradfield:

Thanks for inviting me.

JP:

Liz, as you know, this is another installment of our *Books in Dark Times* series, which asks what books we turn to for guidance and sustenance and engagement at moments like these. The series as a whole takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt's idea in *Men in Dark Times* that even at the darkest moments, you can find sustenance from the thought that things have been better and will be better in the future. And just a reminder that the question we're asking you today, we're also asking our listeners as well. So we want you to think about what sustains and engages you, what pushes and prods you, and maybe, you know, what makes you want to get out there and do things in the world again? So, Liz, can I just start off with some of those general questions I started you with in advance. Like, what books give you comfort and why comfort or joy and why?

EB:

Well, I find myself pretty scattered right now. I usually love to dive into novels, but I don't have the mind for it right now. So I'm turning, not surprisingly, to poetry. I actually started skipping through a bunch of different books, different little things in the news are sending me to different books on my shelves. You know, Eavand Boland's death a couple of days ago sent me back to look at all of her. Her work was just so phenomenal and the resonance of a poem of hers, like "Quarantine" in this moment is I mean, it's just such a heartbreakingly beautiful poem.

JP:

Can you say more? I'm so glad you mentioned her. Cause I was just reading her obituary this morning and realizing, even though I teach Irish literature, I don't know as much about her as I should. So tell us about, can you tell us about "Quarantine"?

EB:

Yeah. I mean, actually I have it here. You know, Eavand taught at Stanford for a long, long time. And so I was fortunate enough to be able to study with her when I was there. And she is just the most passionate advocate for poetry's power and the most uncompromising critic and reader of poem. She's both incredibly generous and incredibly hard eyed and always, always incredibly certain, which really baffles me as a person. But this poem of hers from her book *Against Love Poetry*. There's so many great videos of her online reading this poem and talking about it. But she talks about how she discovered the instance for this poem, which was by reading a text in which the story of a woman stepping out from her house and finding two people frozen to death, huddled together, nearby. And it made, it made Eavand come to this poem and to think about the, the devastating history of the famines in the late 1800's in Ireland.

["Quarantine"](#)

In the worst hour of the worst season  
of the worst year of a whole people

a man set out from the workhouse with his wife.  
He was walking—they were both walking—north.

She was sick with famine fever and could not keep up.

He lifted her and put her on his back.

He walked like that west and west and north.

Until at nightfall under freezing stars they arrived.

In the morning they were both found dead.

Of cold. Of hunger. Of the toxins of a whole history.

But her feet were held against his breastbone.

The last heat of his flesh was his last gift to her.

Let no love poem ever come to this threshold.

There is no place here for the inexact

praise of the easy graces and sensuality of the body.

There is only time for this merciless inventory:

Their death together in the winter of 1847.

Also what they suffered. How they lived.

And what there is between a man and woman.

And in which darkness it can best be proved.

JP:

Wow. Liz, That's amazing.

EB:

Almost broke down crying in the middle of reading that.

JP:

What does the word *proved* mean there in that final, that final word? I've been baking a lot. So I think about proofing. And is it that sense? Tested, attested.

EB:

Yeah. I mean, in the way that tested, I think, right. I mean, if you're, if you were sick and starving and huddled together outside to have, you know, to have the

last act of your life to be generosity, you know, to be one in which in times of trouble, to have love be your final gesture. Ooh. It's just, I think that's what she means.

JP

Yeah. Yeah. That's incredible. When we talk about Irish literature, we talk a lot about the Troubles and how *the Troubles* is a word for one time in Ireland, but it could be a word for like many decades in Ireland. Like there's a lot of *troubles* there.

EB:

Yeah. Yeah. For sure. I love, I love the way Eavand Boland she brings together the personal details of lives, but she doesn't ignore the historic political context that shaped them. And so, yeah, there's bridging of, it's not quite confessional--although that's in some of her poems--but this, this awareness of how the personal is politicized or how politics shapes the personal and it's done in such a beautiful and natural way. It's not forced at all in her poems, but again, and again, she finds the right moment to turn that, turn that screw and let us really examine how these things work with each other really.

JP:

Do you know, this woman Maeve Binchy? I'm just reading *Circle of Friends*. Yeah. She's amazing. And she's so, I mean, she's such a, in a way, like, I mean, I say light, but not in the sense of lightweight, like she's so enjoyable and kind of soap opera and engaged in a melodramatic set of plots, but you always know who's Protestant and who's Catholic, who's comes from the great house, who comes from down the village. When there's a house that doesn't quite belong to the village or to the great house, you know, who lives there and why their story is different. You know, that, that sense of provincial possibility of locating people and relationships to one another very easily.

EB:

Oh yeah, yeah. Yeah. I think, I mean, I think about just listening to that and thinking about it, that I think it's one of the things that I love about living

where I do. Living out here on the Cape, in Truro and Provincetown. And I feel like I'm able to map, I'm able to map that much more acutely than I would be in a larger community. You know what I mean? The person who's checking out my groceries is also an amazing artist and I know that, you know, cause the town is small. Or who has a summer home and how are they buying the influence for...You know what I mean? All of those power dynamics and the services and disservices of a community feel really visible. Yeah.

JP:

So do, so Liz, are you a fan of any of these books that kind of poetry that like *Winesburg Ohio* --or *Spoon River Anthology* rather-- like poems that just kind of like summon up a whole set of people in their relationship to one another?

EB:

Yeah. I mean, I love a project book, you know, a book of poems. I always read books of poems start to finish as one would a novel. I enjoy that unfolding and I love a book that has a real focus, whether it's a community or, you know, a set of obsessions or a historic figure. So I do. And I think what I like about things like *Spoon River Anthology* is, is that fractal view of a community, just having these flashes of people and, and the gaps between those flashes being something that I get to map a little bit for me to fill in. Yeah. That's part of what I enjoy about that type of collection too.

JP:

Can you say more oabout other project books? Cause like I was thinking you made me think of the Louise Gluck book about Persephone and Demeter, *Aulis*--is that what it's called? Yeah. So that doesn't sound like you're a fan of that. That's not one that does it for you, but I, that book really worked for me as a project book.

EB:

No, I think, you know, I think when I think of Louise Gluck I always go to the *Wild Iris* of her collections, but honestly I haven't read her as deeply as some other poets, but you know, I'm thinking of thinking right now of Brian Teare's

book, *Doomstead Days* that I just finished. It's, a new book. And Brian Teare is just an amazing writer and thinker and a lot of the poems *Doomstead Days* he's engaging with climate change, but he's looking at, he's looking at the way the body's frailties are mapped onto the landscape's frailties. He looks at the first public disaster he witnessed, which was an oil spill in San Francisco Bay. He talks about his own illness and the, the pharmaceuticals in his body entering into the world and just this, this mix of the permeability of the self and the world. And a lot of these poems are composed on these long walks.

JP:

When we go through high school, we get taught about like the different forms of poetry, lyric poetry. Epic poetry, dramatic poetry. Is that, is that length point you're making like, are all of the poems you're talking about, would you call them lyric? Or do you think there's a way in which the longer poem kicks into a different genre or, you know, I guess, I don't know if people even write epic poetry nowadays.

EB:

Well sure you think about Derek Walcott's *Omeros*.

JP:

Yeah, I was thinking about that. That's it's not just a project book, right? That is a poem.

EB:

And Merwin's *The Folding Cliffs*. I mean, that's amazing looking at early contact Hawaii and the devastation of leprosy on the islands.

JP:

*The Folding Cliffs*. Wow. Okay. Yeah.

EB:

It's an amazing book. Yeah.

JP:

So those are deliberately epic sort of book length poems. Right. But then you're talking about, I don't know, lyric piled on lyric or something.

EB:

Yeah. I think often that happens. And then I think, you know, and when I was in graduate school, one of my teachers was Linda McCarriston and she thought a lot about the *lyric* impulse versus the *bardic* impulse. So not thinking of lyric as a short thing necessarily, but the lyric as the self reflecting upon the self, whether it's resonance with a cloud or whatever, and the bardic being the self speaking outward, an Irish tradition, the poet speaking to power for the people and the lyric being this moment of self-reflection. And I think, I think there are many lyric poems and some of these book-length projects like say Natasha Trethewey's book, *Bellocq's Ophelia* in which she looks at, she looks at this photographer in New Orleans, who early days of photography would go to the brothels in New Orleans and particularly the brothels of mixed-race prostitutes and document them. And so she brings a lyric perspective into those moments and she gives one of the models that he photographed her own voice in those poems as woman named Ophelia. So it's, *Bellocq's Ophelia* is the title. But overall it becomes a bardic impulse, which I think is really interesting because through these lyric moments, these moments of reflection, as they accumulate, you realize that they're engaging with how were these experiences shaped and what are the political realities for these figures as well. And so I think they're kind of doing both, you know?

JP:

So say more about the bardic; I feel like there's a distinction, Yeats's distinction: "We make of a quarrel with other's politics. We make up of our quarrels with ourselves poetry." So you're actually kind of, this is a different from that Yeats distinction, right? Cause you're saying there's a bardic impulse that is poetic, but is actually could be a quarrel with others. It doesn't have to be, it doesn't have to be navel contemplation.

EB:

One of the things I'm really turning to as a reader these days is not even narrative nonfiction, but field guides like *Guide to the Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of North American Birds*. I could read it all day long, you know.

JP:

Say more about that. Like what does it do to do for you? Is it, is it a substitute? Does it put you out there?

EB:

Well, it gives me this little satisfying bump of feeling like I'm learning something which is--instead of just sitting around. Right. I think it's partly because it's spring too, and migratory birds are coming through. And I just start thinking about there's so much that I don't know about so much. So hear a bird, look up the bird, read about the nest. I think also the form and the structure of a natural history guide where you have categories and they're each kind of answered in detail, like this is in this book, there's the description of the nest, the breeding season, the eggs, the incubation, the nesting period, these, and they vary, but they're the same. And I, I find it really beautiful and fascinating as the genre as well as just the information that's in there.

JP:

Yeah. I totally hear you. I have this Sibley guides and I try to read them that way sometimes. And somehow I'm just not programmed that way. Like I read them, I can read one section and think it's great, but I dunno, like when I was in the, when I was lucky enough to go to the Galapagos, then the books just came alive for me. And I was reading them like the second I got back on the boat, I would just start reading them. But it was because it was, I was, it was over-determined, you know, like the world gave me the reference and you're clearly able to bring the world in to that taxonomy.



EB:

I don't know if it's that different though, really? Cause it's not first thing I turn to in the morning. But as soon as I come back inside from having been outside, there's something that I see, like pick up a shell on the beach. *Do I really know what this is? Let me go look it up.* And I love the field guide as an initial point of reference because I also love to see what's on either side. You know what I mean? And looking up stuff online is just not as satisfying these books, which, you know they blow my mind too for just how did we figure some of that stuff out? Like how did someone get into that nest cavity, and document this building? How did someone have the time or even the imagination to watch an ant crawling across the yard and envision the complexity of that.

JP:

Totally! Liz, do you know a book called *The Love of Insects* by maybe his name is Eisner Esner not Lauren Eisley, but it's like that. He's a friend of EO Wilson's and he's like an insect expert. I mean, I think he's just generally an insect guy, but, but he had like a 50-year career and he's interested in insect, camouflage and weaponry basically. Like, so he's interested in how a fecal shield works on a dung beetle and how different kinds of miming work. Like how much energy do you have to give up to look a little bit like a bee? How much energy do you have to give up to look a lot like a bee if you're a non-stinging insect. Wow. And that's just amazing to me how ,we can know those things.

EB:

I know, especially animals that go through radically different life stages. Like I was reading about the life stages of echinoderms the other day. So starfish or urchins, sand dollars. And to figure that out in the ocean that you have this tiny planktonic creature that looks a little bit like a space capsule then, and then the later form is growing inside of it. And it turns itself inside out like a sock and becomes an urchin. I mean it's how, how did anyone, I don't know.

JP:

I know. And we make fun of people for calling barnacle geese barnacle geese. You know, listen, geese coming out of barnacles is actually not as crazy as some of the things that actually happened. That one happened to be wrong,

but could be true. By the way, it's Thomas Eisner *For Love of Insects*. You should check it out. Even just the images are unbelievable. Wonder if that guy is still alive. You know, he figured out like how hot the spray is that comes out of beetles, like it's 227 degrees or whatever.

EB:

Oh my God.

JP:

It's amazing. Yeah. I love that.

So, Liz, I think lots of people listening will want to know you know, since we often talk about childhood books here, people will want to know kind of like, it's like the childhood of the poet question. Like when you were a kid, did poetry turn you on? Do you remember early books that did turn you on?

EB:

I love to read. I was super obsessed with all of this series books, any ones I could get my hands on: broken series, you know, Nancy Drew or the Boxcar Children, or for me it was *Trixie Belden*. It was kind of this, she was a school girl Shamus, you know, she was a young detective and kind of a tomboy and I loved Trixie Belden. Yeah, she was great. But I didn't know. I, you know, we had child's children's garden, the verse and we had some Shel Silverstein around the house, but poetry, wasn't the thing for me then I will say that I still love, love reading young-adult novels. I actually just read that's a, that's a book that I still can fall into, in these moments, a friend who is a bit younger than me and who grew up in Austria, we were talking about books and she asked if I had ever read *The Giver*. Do you know this book? It was published, I think in '94 we found out and I, I had never heard of it. It was beyond my, you know, young adult reading days. Yeah. I just read that last week. And that was the kind of book that on a rainy day, just put me on the couch and don't talk to me....

JP:

So what was, so what was your *aha!* moment with poetry? Like did it come in

formal education or did it come just like out in the world? Like what, what poetry like lit a rocket under you?

EB:

Well, I mean, I think there's a, there's a double pronged answer, you know, like when I was young and in school we get these assignments like, Oh, you could do a haiku instead or write a poem from the perspective of this historic character. I was like, *That sounds easy. I'll do that.*

JP:

Poetry: the easy way out!

EB:

And I would get praised for it. So that made me feel good. So I was like, *Oh, let me do some more.* But I didn't really feel it as a driving passion then. Not until really high school when there were a lot of feelings that needed dealing with and poetry for me, felt like the place that gave me permission to have big dramatic feelings. And then it became really a lifeline and then. But--*and then but--*I don't think I really, I don't think I really seriously considered trying to always write or be a poet in any way, shape or form until, until I took a workshop in college as a freshmen and we had to *revise*. And all of a sudden the logic side of my brain that likes puzzles and order and surprise met the emotional part of my brain that loves beauty and *thickness*. And that playing that felt, you know, the video game of the time was Tetris, which I also love just,

JP:

Oh my God, I love Tetris.

EB:

And that's what revision of poetry started to feel like, like all those little pieces just coming together and building something. And then I, then I was, I was hooked.

JP

Wow. So is there a poet who stood for that for you? Like you were watching you reading a poem by Elizabeth Bishop and you saw, *Oh, this is how it's done*, or you saw a revision, nothing like that..?

EB:

No. I mean, I think it was being forced to do it to my own poems. And even just seeing in a workshop, the teacher, she was a graduate student at the time, Shelly Withrow, she had the best accent and having her re-envision a poem, it felt like a superpower to me. Like, well, *what if you put the end at the beginning?* I was like, *Oh my God, you just blew my mind. You can do that?*

JP:

Wow. That's great. Do you ever translate? I'm just wondering in the puzzle side of things, it sounds like that might be appealing?

EB:

Unfortunately, I mean, I'm, I have, I have rough Spanish and rough Italian, but I don't have a depth of knowledge of another language. Yeah. I think, I think that energy that puzzle-solving energy in relation to poetry is maybe more what I put into *Broadsided* and pairing the literary and visual and design mind too, yeah.

JP:

So Liz maybe like a final question. I love the way you talked about reading sort of a whole book. So is there a book you want to leave us with? We sometimes call this "The Recallable Book," which is basically like a book that, you know, if this conversation got you thinking, what's the book you would pull off the shelf. You've actually given us a ton of different things, but, you know, I wondered if there's one book that hasn't come up that you wanted to go to bat for.

EB:

Yeah. I mean, it's so hard to give one. There are so many books I think are amazing, but a recent discovery for me a friend of mine, a former student actually she recommended that I read one book by this author and I did, and it was amazing. And then I got another by Leanne Simpson and this book of hers, *This Accident of Being Lost*. And she, she is a First Nations writer from the greater Toronto area. But I think what I love about this book--she is, she's a little bit punk-rock. She's got a lot of attitude and swagger, and she also has a lot of self-questioning and she's bringing in ideas of indigeneity and relationships. And there's so much complicated negotiation with lovers and friends and political moments and contemporary life. And how do you, how do you honestly live contemporary life with an awareness of genocide? And I, I really have been loving her work.

JP:

Hey Liz, can I put you on the spot? You don't have to do this if you don't want to, but can you read my favorite--You know that my favorite poem by you is "We all want to see a mammal." Is there a chance you could read that? You don't have to if you don't want to!

EB:

I could read it. I could almost recite it, but I can't quite. Let me find it. Alright.

### [We all want to see a mammal](#)

We all want to see a mammal.  
Squirrels & snowshoe hares don't count.  
Voles don't count. Something, preferably,  
that could do us harm. There's a long list:  
bear, moose, wolf, wolverine. Even porcupine  
would do. The quills. The yellowed  
teeth & long claws.

Beautiful here. Peaks & avens.  
Meltwater running its braided course, but we want  
to see a mammal. Our day our lives incomplete  
without a mammal. The gaze of something  
unafraid, that we're afraid of, meeting ours

before it runs off.

Linnaeus was called  
indecent when he named them. Plenty  
of other commonalities (hair, live young,  
a proclivity to plot). But no. Mammal.  
Maman. Breasted & nipples  
& warm, warm, warm.

JP:

Thank you, Liz. That was great. Wow I love the tone you read that in. I never really realized quite how sardonic it starts out.

EB:

It's one of a series of what I call my *cranky naturalist poems*.

JP:

Yeah. I like it because I feel like you're, you're channeling those folks up the side of the boat with their glasses, but you're kind of mocking them at the same time. It's like....

EB:

Oh, and I am one at the same time. Yeah, yeah, I want to see a mammal. I catch myself doing that stuff all the time. Like this one gets boring if only I could.

JP:

I know. No, no, you, you really capture it. Well, Liz, thank you so much. So I'm just gonna read the credits now and say that Recall This Book is hosted by John Plotz and usually by Elizabeth Ferry with music by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing is by Claire Ogden, website design and social media by Kaliska Ross. And as you know, dear listeners, we do always want to hear from you with comments, criticisms, suggestions for future episodes, and also with your own books in dark times, you can email us directly. You can

tweet out at hashtag #Booksindarktimes or contact us via social media and our website. Finally, If you enjoyed today's show, please, please, I'm begging you, be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever you get your podcast. You might want to check out other Books in Dark Time conversations and also conversations with such writers as Zadie Smith. Cixin Liu and Samuel Delany. So Liz, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

EB:

Thank you for inviting me; this was fun.

JP:

And thank you all for listening.